

**REMARKS OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI
TO THE ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES
SATURDAY OCTOBER 28, 2006
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA**

President Kitka, Chiefs, Respected Elders and Delegates.

In 2003, I had the opportunity to address this convention for the first time as a United States Senator. I pledged to that convention that I would be a Senator who listened to the people. To me that means more than an annual appearance at the AFN Convention. It means visiting with our Native people in the places that they live.

When we come together in Anchorage we focus on the issues of statewide import. Many of those issues are reflected in the proposed resolutions. But when I travel to the villages I hear about issues that are no less important.

- *The length of time it has taken to build sanitation facilities in Buckland.***
- *Why Petersburg, which has an entitlement to BIA road money, can't get the money out of the BIA for important local projects.***
- *Why the federal government is not doing more to cleanup the environmental contamination it left behind during the cold war period.***
- *Why so many of you are still waiting to get title your Native allotments.***

This year my village travel has taken me primarily to the Aleut Region and to the Bering Straits and NANA Regions. I proudly attended the opening of the Sitka Tribe's Family Justice Center in August. And I joined with many of you to participate in the AFN Leadership Conference, focusing on economic

development, in July. I hope to visit 2-3 regions each year – so if I didn't visit your community this year, I hope to see you soon.

After a long hard year in Washington it gives me great joy to return home and spend time with real people. And while nothing beats coming to the AFN Convention in person, I want to extend a warm welcome to our friends who are viewing or listening to the AFN Convention in the villages and worldwide on the Internet.

I remember a time in Alaska when we didn't have satellites and cable television. Television programs were mailed to the Alaska from the Lower 48. So many of the programs my generation watched as children had already aired in the Lower 48 the week before. Seems like ancient history now.

Technology makes our world so much more connected and that has important implications for the future of rural Alaska. Thanks to Julie Kitka's leadership, the AFN has come to embrace technology and the opportunities it creates for our Native people. This is a very good thing in my view.

At one time we believed that our Native people had to make a choice. A choice between a living a mostly subsistence lifestyle in the village, perhaps supplemented by firefighting during the summer. The other choice was to move to Anchorage or one of the hubs for wage employment. It is no wonder that we now refer to Anchorage as the largest Native village in Alaska.

Technology has opened up a range of new economic options for our villages in addition to subsistence. Over time these options will provide opportunities beyond subsistence. But they should never and will never replace subsistence.

The reason is that subsistence is not only a source of nutrition. It is also a source of cultural nourishment for the Elders and the youth alike. It is the glue that defines you as a people.

Yet I also foresee a day when our young Native people will be out hunting early in the morning and writing computer software later in the day. I see a day when people in our villages will be collaborating with colleagues in various places in the world via high speed Internet connections. Collaborating with their colleagues in other parts of the world as equals.

A lot of politicians in Washington complain about how work like this is being outsourced from the Lower 48 to India. I would like to see more work outsourced to Indians – not India. And I want to see more of that work outsourced to Eskimos and Aleuts and Alutiqs.

Expanding these knowledge based opportunities requires infrastructure. We need an educational system in Alaska which prepares our village kids not just to compete with Anchorage and Seattle, but to compete with Germany, Sweden and yes – India.

A strong educational infrastructure in Alaska is one that gives our children options. It should have a strong cultural component which gives our children a reason to believe in themselves. It should work to enrich our children's understanding of Native languages so that they understand their place in this world. But that educational system also needs to provide the English and math and science skills that are demanded by the global economy.

Creating these jobs requires physical infrastructure as well. It means bringing reliable and affordable electricity, heat and fast Internet connections into your villages.

If we cannot afford the electricity to keep the lights on at home and if we cannot afford the fuel to heat our homes, then we will not be able to hold our young people in the villages. To be dependent on an individual such as Hugo Chavez to keep us warm in the winter is not a position that Alaskans or the Nation should be in.

We must take charge of our energy future at the regional and village level. That means developing locally available natural resources – oil and gas, wind energy and geothermal where appropriate.

We also must not forget that some of our villages are facing immediate threats to their survival. They are addressing the urgent consequences of coastal and river erosion. Some people in the Lower 48 know about Shishmaref because they read the Washington Post or the Los Angeles Times. What they don't know is that Shishmaref is merely the tip of the melting iceberg – so to speak.

And we must also be mindful of the need to improve our human infrastructure. We must control the abuse of alcohol, drugs and violence in our communities. We must keep evils like methamphetamines out before they take hold in our communities. And we must muster the courage to stand up against domestic violence and Elder abuse.

I know that many of you feel the same way. I know that many of you feel that it is time for our Native people to take control of our destiny. And I know that many of you also appreciate the gravity of the struggle.

Senator Stevens, Congressman Young and I work tirelessly to deliver federal funding to improve the third world conditions that face your so many of your villages.

We will never give up this fight. Just before Congress recessed for the elections, the Senate passed my bill to extend the life of the Village Safe Water program through 2010. In passing this legislation the Senate has acknowledged that sanitation in rural Alaska is a problem deserving of national attention. That's not an easy feat in an environment where earmarks are attacked every day.

But make no mistake about it. The federal funding we deliver is one piece of the equation that will sustain your villages in the 21st Century.

The other piece has to come from you. Your vision, your drive and your energy to make your villages safe, healthy, productive and most importantly – uniquely Native places. Ted, Don and I do all we can to help your villages survive. Only you can make them thrive.

You have told me that we can't make this happen without the youth. I believe you. That is why I introduced legislation at the AFN's request to make it easier for Native Corporations to issue stock to our Native people born after 1971. Don Young moved the bill through the House of Representatives. President Bush has signed this bill into law. Now it's up to you – the shareholders of each of our Native corporations – to decide whether to give the youth a seat in the board room.

In closing I want to share with you that I often reflect on the words of the Yupik Elder, Harold Napoleon in thinking about how I can best help move our Native people ahead through my work in Washington, DC.

Harold's essay, the Way of the Human Being, explored how our Native people began to rebuild their lives following the epidemics only to meet the challenges of adopting out, boarding schools, the loss of language and the threat to culture.

Harold observes that these traumas continue to afflict us today. They are responsible for the alcohol abuse, drug abuse, depression and suicides which plague our communities today. Work, hard work, he concludes, is the way we strengthen the spirit.

Perhaps that is the reason that the phrase "We are working very hard" appears in so many of the newsletters I receive from Native organizations. That phrase often appears in a Native language and is then translated into English.

And you are working hard. This Native community has so much it can take pride in. The hard and often unacknowledged work in the tribal office. The work of our Native corporations to generate dividends and shareholder employment opportunities. The work of our 8(a) companies which are among the top federal government contractors in the Nation.

The work of our VPSOs, our health aides and our Dental Health Aide Therapists. The work of people in the regional nonprofits and housing authorities and our world class Native health system.

Perhaps the hardest working people of all – the men and women of the Alaska National Guard who spent their summer training in the Mississippi heat. In October I had to visit these fine soldiers as they completed their training in Camp Shelby. They are working very hard to defend our freedoms. Our villages will work very hard to take care of their families while they are away. We wish them well during their tour of duty in the Middle East.

And last but not least, the work of Julie Kitka and her fine staff at AFN. Pushing the envelope every day to generate new ideas to move our Native people forward. As we approach the holidays, we reflect on what we can be grateful for. And when I look at what you are accomplishing today and the foundation you are laying for the future, there is much to reflect upon.

I appreciate all that you do for our Native people and I am proud to stand with you – as your partner – in achieving outstanding results in the year's ahead.

The AFN is so many ways Alaska's best family reunion – a reunion not just for the Native community - but for all Alaskans whose lives have been enriched through their association with the Native community.

Nothing warms my heart more than the time we spent together this time each year. Thank you, once again, for spending a portion of your morning with me.